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How Do You Live?

**GENZABURO
YOSHINO**



Foreword

This is such a strange book, and such a wise book. I wish I had been given it as a small boy, but I suspect I would have found it puzzling or even dull: a book-length essay about how we live our lives, interrupted by the story of a pre-war schoolboy in Japan dealing with friendship and bullying; or a story about growing up, bravery, cowardice, social class and finding out who you are, interrupted by essays about scientific thought and personal ethics. Sometimes the joy of books that seem to contain opposing elements is realising that without both things, you would have a lesser book. (There's a book called *Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville that contains a story about a doomed hunt for a white whale and also contains essays about whales and

whale hunting. Some people like one part of the story, and some like the other. For me, the joy is that the book contains both parts, pulling at each other, each informing the other side, and that if you removed either part you would have a less interesting book.)

I read *How Do You Live?* now, in this sparkling new translation, because Hayao Miyazaki is basing his next film on it. It's a film he has said that he is making for his grandson, as a gift to the future.

The finest time I spent with Mr Miyazaki was in the building he was making for the children of the neighborhood around Studio Ghibli, where he makes his cartoons. It was built of wood, and there was a bridge across it, inside, too small for adults to cross, but the perfect size for children to go exploring. It was a space for the whole person.

Miyazaki makes films for whole people and makes films about consequences. When I worked on the English-language script of his film *Princess Mononoke*, I was astonished when I finally realised that everything in the film was about consequences of acts and actions: seemingly unrelated events are actually the consequences of other events or actions, and everyone in the film is acting according to what they believe to be their best interests without realising that what they do affects everyone else.

In *How Do You Live?*, Copper, our hero, and his uncle are our guides in science, in ethics, in thinking. And on

the way they take us, through a school story set in Japan in 1937, to the heart of the questions we need to ask ourselves about the way we live our lives. We will experience betrayal and learn about how to make tofu. We will examine fear, and how we cannot always live up to who we think we are, and we learn about shame, and how to deal with it. We will learn about gravity and about cities, and most of all, we will learn to think about things—to, as the writer Theodore Sturgeon put it, *ask the next question*.

Books like this are important. I'm so glad Mr Miyazaki is making his film, not least because it means that, eighty-four years after it was written, Genzaburō Yoshino's novel can be read in English, in Bruno Navasky's gentle and winning translation, and that I got to read it.

Neil Gaiman



Introduction

Copper is in his second year of junior high school. His real name is Honda Jun'ichi. Copper is his nickname. He's fifteen, but on the small side for fifteen, and to be honest, Copper himself is pretty sensitive about that.

At the beginning of each term, the gym teacher has the class form a line, remove their hats, and arrange themselves by height. Copper quietly slips the heel of his shoe onto a stone and cranes his neck in a painful effort to move ahead in the order somehow, but he never does. Instead he always ends up wrestling with his classmate Kitami—nicknamed Gatchin—in a fierce contest for second or third place. Of course, that's from the back end of the line.

But when it comes to grades, it's the other way around. Copper is generally first or second in the class and has hardly ever dropped to third. That said, Copper is no grade-grubber, but rather somebody who likes to play more than most. In baseball he's considered the class athlete. It's charming to see little Copper with his big glove, guarding second base. Small as he is, he's no power hitter, but he knows how to bunt, so he's always picked to bat second in the lineup.

Although he's first or second in grades, Copper has never been the class leader. It's not because he's not well liked, but rather that he can be a bit too mischievous. It wouldn't be right to make Copper the class leader, would it, when he seems happy to spend ethics class hidden from the teacher, making two rhinoceros beetles play tug-of-war, tied together by a thread? When the time comes for a parent-teacher conference, the words that his homeroom teacher says to his mother are always the same: "There's not much to be said about his studies. His test scores are exceptionally good, and as usual it seemed he would be chosen as the class leader. But . . ."

When this "But . . ." comes out, his mother thinks, *Again?* Because what comes next, invariably, is a story of Copper's mischief landing him in trouble.

Actually, Copper's mother may be partially responsible for this. When she comes home from the parent-teacher

conference, she often tells him, “We had another warning from your teacher, you know,” but she’s not particularly severe about it. To tell the truth, his mother can’t give him a hard time about this sort of thing.

The reason she can’t is mostly because Copper’s mischief is rarely irritating or troublesome to anyone, and he’s not bad-spirited, but simply an innocent soul who makes people laugh and amuses them. But besides that, there’s one more big reason: Copper has no father.

Copper’s father passed away just about two years ago. He was a director at a big bank, and after he died, Copper’s family moved from their mansion in the old city to a modest house in the suburbs. They let go of a number of people who worked for them, too, so aside from Copper and his mother, there were just the nanny and one maid, and it became a household of four in all. Unlike the days when his father was alive, they received few visitors, and it suddenly began to feel lonely inside the house. His mother’s primary concern at that time was to preserve Copper’s natural high spirits, so she found herself unable to reprimand Copper very harshly for small matters.

After they moved to the suburbs, an uncle who lived in the neighborhood would come to visit now and again. That uncle was Copper’s mother’s little brother, fresh out of the university with a law degree. Copper would often go to his uncle’s house to play as well. The two of them were

terribly close. People in the neighborhood would often see little Copper and his taller-than-average uncle walking side by side, or in the fields together playing catch, just the two of them.

Copper's nickname was first coined by this uncle. Then one Sunday, just when a schoolmate, Mizutani, had come to the house to play, the uncle dropped by as well. "Copper, Copper" was thrown about, and after that the name quickly spread to school.

Mizutani came to school and jabbered, "Hey, you know Honda, right? Well, at home he's called Copper!" And so it was that his schoolmates came to call him that. Now even his mother will sometimes address him as "Mister Copper."

Why "Copper"? Not one of his friends knows. They just think it's fun, and they all call him that without knowing why. If they ask him "Why are you called Copper?" he just laughs and never explains. But he gets a sort of pleased look on his face, so his friends want to know the reason all the more.

And on this point, we all feel no differently than his friends. So first let's start with the story of Copper's nickname. And then let's report on the curious happenings inside Copper's head.

Why such a report? Read on, and you will understand.

*Chapter One*

A Strange Experience

It happened one October afternoon last year, when Copper was still a first-year student. He was with his uncle, the two of them standing on the roof of a department store in the Ginza district of Tokyo.

A fine mist fell quietly and ceaselessly from the ashen sky, so that it was hard to tell if it was raining or not, and before they knew it, small silver droplets had fastened everywhere on Copper's jacket and his uncle's raincoat, and they looked as if they had been covered with frost. Copper was silent, gazing down at the Ginza Boulevard immediately below.

From seven stories up, the Ginza was a narrow channel. At the bottom, cars streamed past in great numbers, one after another. From Nihonbashi on the right side, flowing beneath him to Shinbashi on the left, and from there in the opposite direction, from the left side back to Nihonbashi, the twin currents slipped past each other, waxing and waning as they went. Here and there between the two streams, a trolley crawled sluggishly by, looking somehow world-weary. The trolleys looked as small as toys, and their roofs were slick with rain. The cars, too, and the asphalt road surface and even the trees lining the road and all else that was there were dripping wet and gleaming with the brightness of daylight shining from who knew where.

Gazing down in silence, Copper began to imagine that the individual cars were insects. *If they were bugs, he thought, they would be rhinoceros beetles. They're a swarm of rhinoceros beetles that comes crawling in a big hurry. Then once they've done their job, they go hurrying home. There's no knowing what it's about, but to them great affairs are happening, make no mistake.*

As Copper thought about the beetles, he noticed how the Ginza gradually narrowed in the distance, finally bending to the left, and there, where it vanished amid the tall buildings near Kyōbashi, didn't it seem like the entrance to their nest? *The little creatures, in their rush to return, disappear over there, one by one. And as they do, their replacements come*

hurrying back, one by one. A black one, a black one, again a black one, now a blue one, a gray one . . .

The powdery mist continued to fall quietly as before. While immersed in his strange fantasy, Copper gazed for some time toward the Kyōbashi neighborhood and eventually raised his face. Below him, the rain-soaked streets of Tokyo spread boundlessly in all directions.

It was a dark, lonely, endless prospect, and watching it, Copper began to feel gloomy, too. As far as the eye could see, the innumerable little roofs continued, all the while reflecting the light of the leaden sky. Breaking up the flat house rows, clusters of high-rise buildings poked up here and there. The farthest of these were gradually caught up in a haze of rain and at last became silhouettes floating between the sky and the vague dullness of the monochrome mist. How profoundly damp it must have been! Everything was wet through and through, and it seemed that even the rocks themselves were permeated with water. Tokyo was submerged, motionless at the bottom of the cold and damp.

Copper had been born and raised in Tokyo, but this was the first time he had ever seen the streets of Tokyo show such a sad and somber face. The hustle and bustle of the city came welling up endlessly from the depths of the heavy wet air to the seventh-floor rooftop, but whether this registered in his ears or not, Copper just stood there,